

Rep. Lofgren Calls on State Department to Add Vietnam to Countries of Particular Concern List

Letter to Secretary of State Rice Notes Concerns on Human Rights

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Washington, DC – Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose) has called on Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to list Vietnam as one of the State Department's Countries of Particular Concern (CPC). In a letter to Secretary Rice, Rep. Lofgren outlined her concern that Vietnam's record on religious freedom, free speech, and other basic human rights has only worsened since receiving Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status with the United States. The complete text of the letter is below:

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary
Department of State
2201 C Street NW

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary,

I strongly urge you to reconsider placing Vietnam on the State Department's Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list for its severe violations of religious freedom, free speech, and other basic human rights.

As you are aware, in 2004, Vietnam was first added to the annual CPC designation because of government repression towards many religious believers. The campaigns to force people to renounce their faith, the detainment of dozens of religious prisoners, and the harassment as well as physical mistreatment of some believers amounted to inexcusable human rights violations. In their efforts to gain Permanent Normal Trade Relations with the U.S. in 2006, Vietnam embarked on a disingenuous public relations campaign to cleanse its image as a human rights violator. Consequently, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John V. Hanford III kept Vietnam off the CPC list and announced that the Government of Vietnam had made significant improvements towards advancing religious freedom.

I think it is obvious that the conditions of religious freedom in Vietnam have not improved but have worsened severely. Ambassador Hanford III cites in his November 13, 2006 briefing that Catholics now have the freedom in Vietnam to train and ordain new priests to serve their congregations. However, recent incidents demonstrate otherwise. For example, the Vietnamese government removed Father Nguyen Van Ly from his parish and sentenced him to 8 years in prison for allegedly conducting propaganda activities to harm the security of the state. Further, Vietnam continues to assert the right to approve of bishops' nominations before they are announced by the Vatican.

The Ambassador also mentioned that Vietnam has laws against forced renunciations and that reports of this disturbing practice are now very isolated. This is simply untrue, as the government continues to harass, arrest, and impose restrictions on organized religious followers such as Catholics and Buddhists, and to view minority religious groups with broad suspicion. The reasons Ambassador Hanford III presented for not re-designating Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern have all been contradicted by these recent events.

Father Nguyen Van Ly is the highest profile dissident currently in prison, but many other human rights and religious freedom proponents have been imprisoned in Vietnam and subjected to government harassment. For example,

Vietnamese police, on March 6, 2007, arrested a pair of human-rights lawyers, Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan, for organizing training sessions for political activists in the capital. There are hundreds of other dissidents whom have been imprisoned simply for expressing speech and attempting the practice of their faith freely and openly.

I appreciate that you brought up human rights concerns with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem during their March 2007 visit to the United States. However, I believe this is not sufficient. The recent actions by Vietnam should be a warning sign that the government will only continue to deny basic human rights and religious freedoms to its people. The United States of America has a long and honorable tradition of advocating for religious freedom and human rights throughout the world, especially with our trading partners. Exceptions should not be made for Vietnam. In light of these and other human rights violations by Vietnam, I urge you to re-designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern.

Sincerely,

Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress
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Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren is serving her seventh term in Congress representing most of the City of San Jose and Santa Clara County. She serves as Chair of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law. She also Chairs the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections and serves on the House Homeland Security Committee. Congresswoman Lofgren is Chair of the California Democratic Congressional Delegation consisting of 34 Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives from California.